

Hoboes on Harvest

Objective

Students read about the Great Wheat Belt Migration, the yearly migration of wheat harvest workers in the early 1900s, answer and discuss comprehension questions, practice finding the main idea in paragraphs and comparing characters, write imaginary letters and research to find more information. Students will locate states involved in the Great Wheat Belt migration on a US map. Students will develop a timeline to place the Great Wheat Belt migration in context.

Background

From the early 1900s to the mid 1920s, the wheat fields of the middle West and Great Plains were scenes of great movement. Only a few workers were needed to plant the wheat crop, using the machinery available at that time, but large numbers of workers were needed for the harvest. To do this work as many as 250,000 men were annually on the move from field to field, following the ripening crop.

The migration started in May, in the area around Garfield County, Oklahoma, and moved steadily northward, reaching North Dakota by the middle of August, and passing on into Canada. Some of the workers moved all the way from Oklahoma and Texas to the Dakotas and Canada, traveling mostly by train. The rail station in Enid, Oklahoma, became the starting point for this Great Wheat Belt migration.

While smaller operations might get by on help from family and neighbors, most Oklahoma wheat farms required outside labor to bring in the grain. The need for workers depended on the type of machinery used. Smaller wheat farms used binders, which cut the unripened wheat and bound it into shocks. This required only two to four men—called “shockers”—to follow the machine, collect the bundles, and turn them upside down to ripen. The work was slow, because the binder could only harvest about 10-12 acres a day.

More than half the wheat in north-central Oklahoma was cut by machines called “headers.” The header only cut the heads of ripened grain and did not bind them. Because ripe grain could shatter and scatter its seeds, the workers had to get it in as quickly as possible. Header operations required a large number of men working intensively over a period of a few days.

Header crews included men who drove the horse-drawn reapers, men who drove wagons called “barges” that transported the harvested grain, and laborers who arranged the wheat in the wagons for transport and in “ricks” for storage. Headers could cut about 30 acres a day, which meant the workers were on each farm for about one week before moving on to the next one.

Oklahoma Academic Standards

GRADE 6

Speaking and Listening: R.1,2,3;
W.1,2. Reading and Writing
Process: R.1,2,3; W.1. Critical
Reading and Writing: R.5; W.3,4.
Vocabulary: R.1,3,5. Research:
R.1,2,3; W.1,2,3,4
Geography: 1,2,4,5. Culture:
1BC. Physical Systems: 1B,2.
Human Systems: 5

GRADE 7

Speaking and Listening: R.1,2,3;
W.1,2. Reading and Writing
Process: R.1,2,3; W.1. Critical
Reading and Writing: R.5; W.3,4.
Vocabulary: R.1,3,5. Research:
R.1,2,3; W.1,2,3,4
Geography: 1,2,3,5

GRADE 8

Speaking and Listening: R.1,2,3;
W.1,2. Reading and Writing
Process: R.1,2,3; W.1. Critical
Reading and Writing: R.5; W.3,4.
Vocabulary: R.1,3,5. Research:
R.1,2,3; W.1,2,3,4

HIGH SCHOOL

Speaking and Listening: R.1,2,3;
W.1,2. Reading and Writing
Process: R.1,2,3; W.1. Critical
Reading and Writing: R.5;
W.4,5,6. Vocabulary: R.1,3,5
Geography: 1. Oklahoma
Government: 2. Oklahoma
History: 3,5

Ag in Your Community

Invite a wheat farmer to class to answer students' questions about the wheat harvest.

Hobo Dinner

1/4 pound ground beef
1 potato, sliced
1 carrot, sliced
2 tablespoons chopped onion
1 sheet heavy-duty aluminum foil
(18 inches x 13 inches)
Salt and pepper to taste
Seasoned salt to taste

—Shape beef into a patty.
—Place in the center of foil with potato, carrot and onion.
—Sprinkle with salt and pepper and seasoned salt, if desired.
—Fold foil over and seal well
—Place on a baking sheet.
—Bake at 350° for 45 minutes.
—Open foil carefully.

Yield: 1 serving. Prepare 4 to 6 packets for classmates to share.

The work was hard, and conditions were difficult. The harvesters labored in the intense heat and humidity of summer, and many suffered sunstroke and heat exhaustion. Even travel to the fields could be deadly. Oklahoma newspapers regularly ran stories about young men killed while trying to hop freight cars for the Wheat Belt. Brakemen often threw workers from trains, while “hi-jacks”—robbers who preyed on the migratory—probably murdered others.

Many of the workers had to stay in “jungle camps” outside the town. They slept in haystacks, in empty boxcars, or in the open. They scrounged for food. They would boil wheat for gruel or to make flour for pancakes, or concoct a “hobo’s delight” from young alfalfa and bacon rinds. Wages ranged from \$2-4 a day, sometimes dropping as low as 50 cents a day, depending on the supply of workers.

Mechanization of the wheat harvest ended the Great Wheat Belt Migration. The combine harvester cut and threshed the grain in a single operation and made hand shocking unnecessary. With the combine, five men could do the work formerly done by 320.

Because farm machinery is so expensive, many farmers today hire custom operators who bring in their own machinery and crews for the harvest. Custom operations follow much the same migration as that followed by workers in the early part of the last century.

Source: Taylor, Paul Schuster, “Migratory Farm Labor in the United States,” from *Labor on the Land: Collected Writings 1930-1970*, Ayer, 1981.

Materials

- computer/library access
- US map
- Atlas of the World

Procedures

1. Provide students with copies of the Reading Page to read.
 - Lead a class discussion about the story and vocabulary.
 - Hand out copies of the “Main Idea; Comparing Characters” worksheet for students to complete.
 - Lead a class discussion about the answers at the end of the worksheet. (Possible answers to discussion questions:)
 - How did growing wheat in Oklahoma help the war effort in World War I? Can you think of similar situations today? (Some of the first shipments of food to Afghanistan during the 2002 war were of wheat from Oklahoma.)
 - Why would it be a problem for ripe grain to burst open before it could be harvested? (The grain would be lost.)
 - How does the definition of the word “hobo” in the story differ from what you thought the word meant? Why do you think the word came to have a negative connotation?

2. Students will write imaginary letters home describing their experiences on the wheat harvest.
3. Students will use online or library resources to find out how hobo sandwiches got their name. (Hungry hoboes would knock on back doors, and women in the community would give them food. Sandwiches would have been an easy food to hand out the back door.)
4. On a map of the US, students will trace the Great Wheat Belt Migration and name the states included in the Wheat Belt (Oklahoma, Texas,
5. Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota).
 - Students will find the latitudes and longitudes of the Wheat Belt states.
6. Students will research online and in encyclopedias to find information about the wheat belt climate.
7. —Students will compare and contrast the wheat belt climate with the climates in other regions of the US.
8. Wheat originated in the Middle East.
 - Students will find the latitudes and longitudes of the Middle East.
 - Students will compare the latitudes and longitudes of the Middle East with that of the American Wheat Belt.
 - Students will research to find what the American Wheat Belt has in common with the Middle East that makes it a good place for growing wheat.
 - Students will research to find what other parts of the world grow large wheat crops.
 - Students will compare and contrast soil and climatic conditons in other wheat-growing countries with those of the American Wheat Belt.
9. The Great Wheat Belt Migration took place during the first two decades of the 20th Century.
 - Students will place the event in context by researching and discussing what other great events were happening in our country before and after this period. (World War I, Industrial revolution, etc.)
 - Students will develop a timeline of the first two decades of the 20th Century.
10. Introduce the basic concept of labor unions.
 - Lead students in a discussion of why unions might be necessary under certain conditions.
 - Students will research the history of the Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World) and of the labor movement in the US and in Oklahoma.
 - Students will research on the internet to find opinions for and against labor unions. Students will write opinion pieces based on one side of the question.
 - Our official state motto is Labor Omnia Vincit, Latin for “Labor Conquers All.” Students will discuss the meaning and significance of the motto in Oklahoma history.

Vocabulary

custom operation—business that owns specialized farming equipment and hires a crew to do specific jobs for farmers

harvest—the act or process of gathering a crop

header—a machine that cuts the heads of grain and passes them into a wagon

labor union—an organization of wage earners formed to help members get fair wages and working conditions

migration—movement from one place to another

reaper—a machine for picking up grain crops

rick—a stack of hay, straw, wheat or similar material, especially when covered for protection from the weather.

sheaves—bundles of cut stalks of grain or similar plants bound with straw or twine

shock—sheaves of grain stacked upright in a field for drying

thresh—to beat the stems and husks of grain to separate the grains or seeds from the straw

Hoboes on Harvest



Oklahoma is a great place to grow wheat. Our state first began growing large wheat crops during World War I. The fields of Europe had been destroyed by war, so American farmers needed to grow extra food to help feed the people there. At this time all the machinery wheat farmers use now had not yet been invented. So when it was time to bring in the wheat harvest, the wheat farmers needed lots of help.

Most of the wheat was cut by machines called “**headers**.” The header simply cut off the heads of the ripened grain. Horse-drawn **reapers** picked up the wheat. Then it was placed in wagons and taken someplace for storage. Ripe grain could burst open and scatter its seeds, so the workers had to work as quickly as possible.

Header crews included some workers to drive the reapers, some to drive the wagons that took the grain to storage, some to arrange the wheat in the wagons and some to arrange the wheat in ricks for storage. Headers could cut about 30 acres a day. This meant the workers were on each farm for about one week. Then they moved on to another farm and started over.

To do this work as many as 250,000 men were on the move every year. They moved from field to field, following the ripening crop. The **migration** started in Oklahoma in May and moved northward through the summer, ending in Canada in the fall. The workers travelled mostly by train. The rail station in Enid, Oklahoma, was the place where the workers first began to gather each year in May.

The workers were known by several names—“bindlestiffs,” “casuals,” “floaters,” “tramps,” “bums,” and, most commonly, “hoboes.” The word “hobo” probably was short for “hoe boy.” Among the workers themselves the names had different meanings. A hobo was someone who was willing to work. A tramp had given up finding work but still liked moving around with the workers. A bum was someone who had given up finding work and just stayed where he had ended up.

The work was hard. The hoboes labored in the intense heat and humidity of summer. Many suffered sunstroke and heat exhaustion. Even travel to the fields could be deadly. Many young men were killed trying to hop freights for the Wheat Belt. Others were thrown from the trains or murdered by robbers.

Many of the hoboes had to sleep in “jungle camps” outside the towns. They slept in haystacks, in empty boxcars, or in the open. Sometimes they had to scrounge whatever they could find for food. Their pay ranged from \$2 to \$4 a day. Sometimes there were too many workers. Then the pay was even lower.

The Industrial Workers of the World was a **labor union** that tried to organize the hoboes to help them get better wages and working conditions. members of the union were called “Wobblies.” Some people didn’t like the Wobblies because they thought they caused trouble. In the years when there were too many workers, those who couldn’t find work sometimes did cause trouble. These few gave the others a bad name.

The Great Wheat Belt Migration ended with the invention of the combine harvester. The combine harvester cut and threshed the grain in a single operation and made hand shocking unnecessary. With the combine, five men could do the work formerly done by 320. Today many wheat producers hire custom operators to bring in the harvest. Custom operators have their own equipment and crews. They follow the wheat crop from Oklahoma to Canada, just as the hobo workers did nearly 100 years ago.

Oklahoma Ag in the Classroom is a program of the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry and the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

Main Idea, Comparing Characters

1. This story was mainly about
 - a. Hoboes who worked hard in summer.
 - b. Combines taking over the work of hoboes.
 - c. How mobile workers called hoboes helped harvest wheat.

2. The main idea in paragraph three is that
 - a. 250,000 men were on the move.
 - b. Workers moved from field to field from May to fall.
 - c. How workers traveled by train

3. To summarize paragraph five, you could say
 - a. The hobo life was very hard.
 - b. The intense heat and humidity of summer made the hoboes sick.
 - c. Sometimes hoboes were thrown from trains or murdered.

4. The difference in a hobo and a tramp would be
 - a. Hoboes rode on trains and tramps walked.
 - b. Hoboes moved around to get work, and tramps had given up trying to find work.
 - c. Hoboes continued to work, but tramps just stayed where they ended up.

5. What were “wobblies?”
 - a. Hoboes who caused trouble by fighting.
 - b. Bums who were looking for work.
 - c. Members of the labor union.

6. Select ONE of the questions below and write your answer in paragraph form.
 - a. How did growing wheat in Oklahoma help the war effort in World War I? Can you think of similar situations today?
 - b. Why would it be a problem for ripe grain to burst open before it could be harvested?
 - c. How does the definition of the word “hobo” in the story differ from what you thought the word meant? Why do you think the word came to have a negative connotation?

Name _____

Continental United States



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